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Reconstructing the Farm: Life Stories of Dutch Female Farmers

Marisa Turesky
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Reconstructing the Farm:

Life Stories of Dutch Female Farmers

A research photo-documentary



Turesky, Marisa
Brandeis University
Anthropology and Women's and Gender Studies

Academic Director: Connors, Kevin
Advisor: Taekema, Irina

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Abstract

My research asks: what are the lived experiences of female farmers within the hegemonic construction of the Dutch farmer and how have their roles shifted through time? Popular culture has implanted stereotypes that most female farmers are uneducated, low-class individuals but the six women whom I interviewed present life stories that complicate this. How did these women come into their roles as farmers? Once they became such entrepreneurs, what were their challenges in a potentially male-dominated profession? While there has been extensive research on rural women's historical roles in farming, I analyze the personal experiences of a small sample of women farmers in the Netherlands. They discuss their inspiration, challenges, successes and innate passion within farming. Farming is considered a lifestyle by most of the women. There is not a defined line between work and home and thus the arduous nature of the job does not easily permit the woman to be a sole proprietor and active mother. These women's stories complicate Sherry Ortner's theory of women as closer to nature and men as closer to culture. The only drastic conclusion that can be made from these few narratives is that every female farmer will have her own story to tell.

Acknowledgements

To: The women who invited me to their homes and their farms, fed me, and spent hours answering my seemingly endless questions. Your openness, warmth, and encouragement allowed me to fully invest my heart in this research.

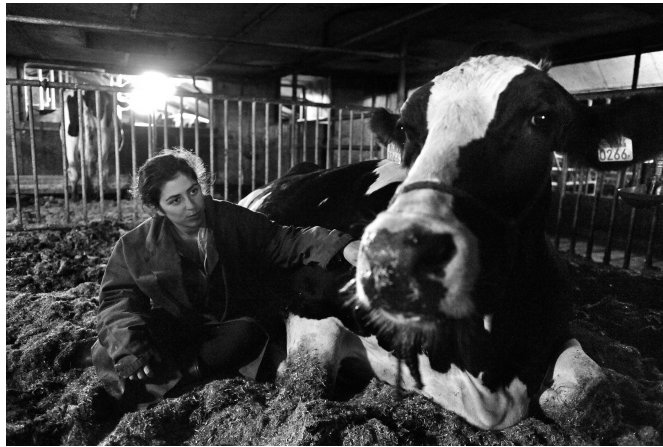
To: Mom, Dad and Teddy for encouraging me to pursue my passion for food culture and academia. Through example, you have shown me the thrill of pursuing what you love.

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Photograph Courtesy of Hannie van Herk

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Introduction

Historically, Dutch women's roles and efforts on the farm have been undervalued and, in large part, unrecognized. These few interviews are meant to portray women's autonomy and prestige in the field. This research analysis of six women's experiences as farmers is not meant to generalize the opinions and encounters of every Dutch female farmer. As Margareet van der Burg says, "farm women can have different age, marital status, religion, education level, ethnic background and set of values" (125). These six women speak to such diversity within a single niche of society.

Two distinctly different kinds of farms are industrial and biological farms. The former tends to dominate the agricultural sector both here in the Netherlands and abroad while the latter farm is often a small and independent farm that uses the least amounts of synthetics and, instead, relies on more natural approaches. Many biological farms in Holland tend to also be *care farms*. The government assigns individuals who need some sort of care in their work (this might be due to intellectual impairment, addiction, or other disabilities) to these farms and, in exchange, the farm receives funding from the government.

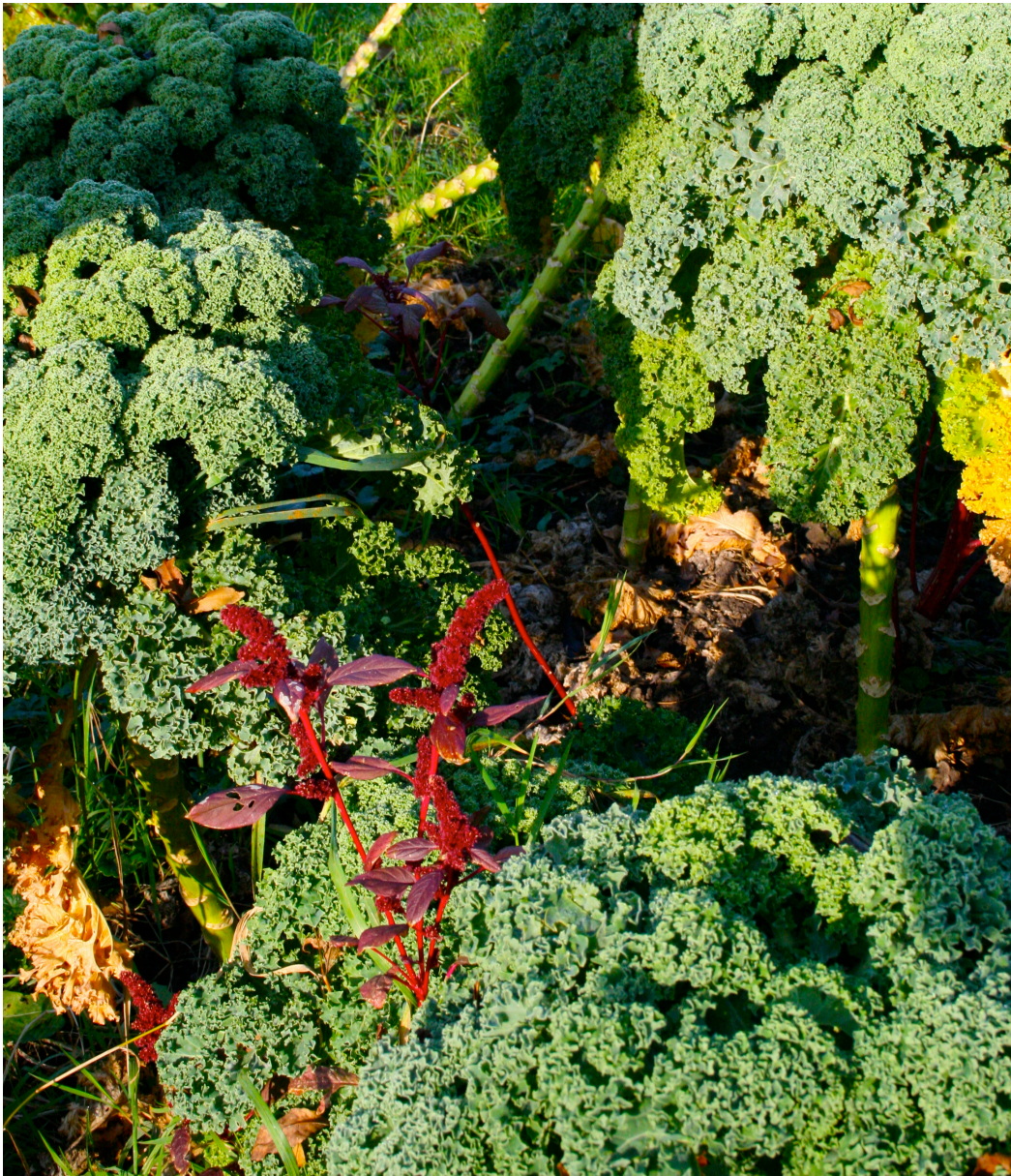
The role of Dutch women working on farms has shifted through generations. Historically, Dutch women were key business partners for their husbands' farms. Such women have a range of responsibilities; these are anywhere from balancing work in the field with domestic duties inside of the home to complete ownership of the farm. The latter women were typically, but not limited to, the daughters of farmers who wanted to continue the family farm. Female ownership has not been as common since women have often been stifled by economic and political reform that keep them dependent on their partner. Such women had little (if any)

autonomy since the husband was often the only individual in the home with an income. This, alone, was a strategic move because it made him eligible for tax deduction and social security that would be extended to the rest of the family (Geluk-Geluk, 1994: 17). Until recently, women's contributions to the farm were not often recognized in either social, political or economic manners.

While gender norms are shifting to allow for more autonomy among women on farms, the profession of "the female farmer" is shifting, as well. Thus, the identity of the female farmer as merely an economically dependent spouse is becoming obsolete. With the popularization of the sustainable and local food movement, more young progressives want to grow and, in some cases, distribute, their own food. Women who now work on farms may no longer have a fixed lifestyle that is "consumed" by traditional roles and responsibilities limited to agriculture and domestic duties. In this study, I plan to discuss these women's lives from the past experiences to their aspirations for the future.

According to the Central Bureau for Statistics (CBS), in 1991, 6.6% of Dutch heads of farms were women. In less than ten years, the percentage has decreased to 5.8% (2011: 38). The purpose of this research is to show how, if at all, there has been a shift in the backgrounds and identities of women working on farms. Margareet van der Burg notes that "not all groups are able or have equal access opportunities to express themselves. For instance, illiterate farm women did not leave diaries to read nor did the literate ones" (1994: 124). Even if women could read and write, they were not granted enough time in the day to chronicle their lives in a journal. As such, oral histories are crucial to understanding the personal narratives of farm women through history. These women's testimonies will serve to educate individuals (from Holland and

abroad) about the women who produce their food and what events and/or people influenced them in getting to their current position. Here, I look at the lived experiences of female farmers within the hegemonic construction of the Dutch farmer in the Netherlands and how their roles may have shifted through the years.



Crops in Trijntje's farm

Meet the Farmers

Alice & Anke

Alice and Anke are in a romantic relationship and live together on the milk farm they started over two years ago with forty cows, all of whom have names. Anke has been farming since she was a young child while Alice is a relative novice. Though both of their grandparents were farmers, neither grew up on a farm. In Anke's case, however, she always found her way to a farm, even as a young child. They told me on separate occasions that farming is a "way of life" and that they truly love farming because "it is in our blood."



Trijntje

Growing up near her grandfather's farm, Trijntje has had a long felt a connection to this land that she now owns. Now, because of its proximity to the city, her vegetable and fruit farm is in



constant danger of being converted into a concrete park. We stood, overlooking the land juxtaposed against the highway and industries just behind it. As we strolled, she began telling me a personal story but would often be distracted by an aspect of her farm and would excitedly switch the topic. Until she took over the farm, Trijntje had various jobs from social work to viticulturist circuitous life until she took over the farm, I quickly understood that our interview's nonlinear nature was a sign of her evident enthrallment of the land. I would eventually pull her back to her story, she

would smile, and poignantly resume her story. As long as she can protect the farm, Trijntje's ideal future is to continue farming.

Iris

A proud farmer and mother, Iris has taken over her parents' conventional dairy farm with 80 cows and 500 goats. Their farm has become so big that, for efficiency, they keep the animals inside the stable at all times. Iris and her husband work with only one or two other people to maintain the farm from which they now live a few kilometers since they are now expecting their second child. Although we talked at her house, she had a framed photo of her farm on the table so that she could give me a virtual tour. Iris tried higher education and decided that it was not right for her because she just wanted to work with her hands. She told me how much she used to enjoy going to the pubs and out to parties but now her focus is on the farm and motherhood. Her family is very important as she brought up her sorrow concerning her parents' recent divorce, her close relationship with her brothers, and her



immense admiration of her mother. They all live so close to one another that a few minutes before I left their house, Iris' brother came over for a surprise visit. She assured me that this was quite common. Because her parents have a great investment in the farm and they are now getting divorced, Iris has a hard time thinking about what the future will bring. However, she hopes to remain a farmer forever.

Welmoet

Having grown up in both the suburbs and a city, Welmoet has experienced agriculture from an advocacy and producer's perspective. She studied environmental studies at university and quickly became enthralled with biological farming. Welmoet was spontaneously inspired to start her own farm with a friend after an internship the two had. After struggling for support and funds, the two young women started their biological vegetable farm. They work about ten hours per day and have eight volunteers. With a subtly pregnant stomach, Welmoet told me that she would only work on biological farms as a way to improve the environment for future generations. She explains to me that she has great pride during harvest season when she can provide her own produce to customers and that she also loves the winter season when she can relax and reflect on their year's work. As the youngest farmer with whom I spoke, Welmoet is unsure what the future will bring but knows that it will have something to do with agriculture.



Maria

Maria grew up on a farm with her parents and five siblings. She made the conscious decision to attend University for philosophy and wanted nothing to do with farming. After spending time in Chile for social justice and agriculture work, she came back to the Netherlands and settled in Amsterdam. It was then that she independently internalized her adoration for farming. However, Maria always reminded me that she loved farming so much since she was still working with



people through her farm shop and school tours. She also relies on these people, her customers, and their enjoyment of her products, to garner support in her daily life. When she and her husband got married, they took over her husband's parent's cheese farm. The city took away their 400-year-old farm, so they were forced to rebuild their business and biological farm elsewhere. Now, they live in a Gaudí-style home on their land with 65 cows. Maria says that she is still looking for her path within her farming life.

Methodology: a typical day on the farm

I recognize the reflexivity in my fieldwork because I am a white, financially secure woman, educated in a private University, where I study Anthropology and Women's and Gender Studies. My perspective is also distinct because I advocate for sustainable food which often conflicts with industrialized foods. However, I talk with women who are working on both kinds of farms since they will have varying life stories and narratives about their roles on the farm. I visited the farms of my interviewees as a researcher seeking to *understand* these women's lives and how their roles have shifted through the generations.

For years, I have worked with and for farmers in America. The land on which I grew up and where my parents currently live was once a lettuce field. My hometown was dominated by farmland. Now, we only have two family farms in that town. Through my advocacy of sustainable agriculture, I have noticed that the women with whom I work are no longer domestic wives or poor, rural women. To the contrary, these women tend to be academically, politically, and, in most cases, ecologically, informed. They chose to farm for various reasons but few fit the old-world stereotype of the woman as purely "the farmer's wife." The oral histories will also be analyzed from a gender lens, since interviewees' identity will shape the way in which their perspectives about their profession are formed.

This report is the result of a one-month qualitative and ethnographic research study that investigates the lived experiences of female farmers within the hegemonic construction of the Dutch farmer in Holland. I will be taking into consideration the types of farms on which these women work to understand whether that plays a part in or is connected to their ideals and lived

experiences in the past, present and future. My investigation of female farmers is also be based on observational data that I gathered from watching and listening to the women work.

I interviewed the women based on oral history pedagogy and ethnographic fieldwork. Oral histories allow me to understand the women on a personal level, which leads to more genuine and extensive responses. This research is about a very specific group within Dutch society and, as such, one-on-one discussions are the best way for me, as the researcher, to understand and learn about individuals within this demographic. The fieldwork component will ground my informants' responses in their actions. In essence, what they said during their interviews may not be what they practice in their lives. Working with them on the farm has given me the chance to know and learn from them in their "home field." Spending more time with the interviewees during their work allowed these women to express their lives and opinions to me in a more casual setting without the stress of a more formal interview. The oral history/life story interviews were semi structured, but the informants tended to lead the discussion. My time with the interviewees lasted from two hours to overnight stays. Every woman, with the exception of Iris, walked me around their farm and spoke with me, in depth, about their agriculture practices. I found these women using the snowball methodology through informants at the School of International Training as well as local agricultural organizations. The various organizations with which I am working are diverse and, subsequently, lead me to a heterogenous sample. While this study will not be a completely random sample of Dutch female farmers, I am not looking to generalize that population. As such, I will analyze, in-depth, the few women with whom I do speak.

Literature Review

Much of the literature published about farm women highlights the rural female and, more specifically, women who participate in agriculture as the only means to obtain a reliable food source. These were not the women with whom I interviewed and whose life stories I analyze. Although there are contemporary stories of Dutch farm women, the scholarly texts to aid my research focuses on historical shifts in the roles of women, socio-culturally and legislatively.

Since my analysis will be prefaced by definitions of certain terms, I will reference Alenka Verbole's article in *The New Challenge of Womens' Role in Rural Europe Conference Proceedings* (2001), *Farm and Rural Women in the New Europe*. There, she addresses the definitions and variations in farm and rural women. Verbole explains the distinction in that farm and rural women "differ not only in their involvement with agricultural production and lifestyle, but also in their level of participation in public and political spheres. ... '[R]ural women' refers to all women living in rural areas (open countryside and small settlements), while the term 'farm women' is used to refer to women who are actively involved in agricultural production..." (2001: 29-30, *originally from* Barbic: 1994; Verbole: 1997)." For my research, I will not discuss rural women but I will use Verbole's definition of farm women. My interviews neither uphold nor reject this hegemony since some of the women with whom I spoke do live in rural areas while others live next to a highway. Verbole also generalizes Dutch female farmers in terms of motivation and educational background. She explains that "gender relations, especially those which determine that women are mainly responsible for domestic work and child care and have lower levels of education and skills, are working to farm women's detriment both in the short- and-long term, making them more vulnerable to poverty" (2001: 30, *originally from* Tyran,

2000). Historically, women who farm in a partnership would be subordinate to their male partner, creating tasks along stereotypical gender lines. The women would thus be financially dependent on their male partners. The women whom I interviewed defied prescribed stereotypical role. I recently spoke to young, urban Dutch people who were stunned that most of the farmers I interviewed were highly educated and intellectually sophisticated. All of these women made an active decision to begin their farms, making them agricultural entrepreneurs.

Before beginning their farms, the women understood the arduous nature of farm work. Farming does not have a gender preference; it is always going to be time-consuming and laborious. Bettina Bock explains the Dutch obsession with part-time work in her article *The Problem, Prospects and Promises of Female Employment in Rural Areas* (2001). The Netherlands has one of the highest rates of part-time work in all of Europe because “women often prefer part-time employment as it helps them to reconcile work and family care. On the other hand, part-time employment prevents women from being economically independent” (2001: 80). In 1999, 55% of women worked part-time compared to only 12% of men. My interviewees are in the minority since their work is not only full-time but the work of farmers is often intertwined with home life. Working on a farm makes it hard to differentiate between personal and professional life whereas there is a discrete line when working in an office.

Bock then cites data about women’s varying investments in labor. While the EU’s percentage of female entrepreneurs in agriculture was 24% in 1993, the Netherlands only had 11% of women; this is less than half of the female entrepreneurs in service in the Netherlands. On the other hand, there were 83% of female family workers involved in agriculture in the Netherlands, over 10% higher than the EU average (2001: 83). This corroborates the historical

data that women would work on the farm, but not more than the time they spent mothering and maintaining the home, leaving these women economically dependent on their husbands. As such, their work in the field would be overshadowed by their time spent on domestic labor. My research highlights the intensity of full-time labor and the determination that these women must have to maintain a lucrative farming business and, in some cases, a family, as well.

Similar to my own research, Stephanie Fisher wrote about the oral histories of farm women, but focused on American women and how politics have pushed them away from industrial farming and more toward biological farming. Her thesis, *The Contemporary American Farm Woman: 1860 to Present*, documents women's role on the farm throughout history. It analyzes the lives of five women who have farms in the northeastern part of America and chronicles these women's lives as farmers. More generally, Fisher's thesis [2010] explores the agriculture industry and how gender discrimination was institutionalized through national surveys and popular culture. She also defines key phrases and agricultural terms like *biodynamic farming* definitions that I will use to inform my readers. Her emphasis that there is no "typical female farmer," while said in terms of American farm women, rings true for Holland. Fisher, like me, emphasizes her small sample size and thus her reluctance to make any generalizations or conclusions about the said population. Her personal and evocative narratives about her few interviewees model the way in which I hope my readers will connect with my small sample of female farmers. Theoretically, Fisher applies Sherry Ortner and Michelle Rosaldo's concept that woman is closer to nature while man is closer to culture. As such, culture can come in the form of "science, particularly agricultural science, [which] is driven by a need to dominate

nature” (20). My research will elaborate on this theory by highlighting the ways in which my interviewees uphold or repudiate said concept.

Men would also dominate the agricultural sector because Dutch legislation positively reinforced women staying in the home with policies like “The Breadwinner’s Principle.” Anjo Geluk-Geluk explains this principle in *The Position of Farm Women in the Netherlands* through women’s shifting position on the farm over the years. He explores the notion of women vying for more economic independence through policy change and off-farm occupations. He explains how gendered tasks are so ingrained in farm life with the distinctly Dutch ‘Breadwinner’s Principal’ in which one partner brings in the money as the breadwinner while the other, usually the woman, takes care of the family and home. Because the woman has no income of her own, the family receives social benefits and tax deductions (17). This policy perpetuated women’s work as invisible and insignificant. Geluk-Geluk then explains the varying labels associated with the roles of women on farms, depending upon their tasks. For instance, the *housewife* would be completely economically dependent on her partner while the *supporting spouse* may receive some form of income. More popular now is the *man/woman-partnership* in which the woman is more of an entrepreneur. The most autonomous women, the *independent entrepreneur*, has complete ownership of her farm, which is typically handed down from her father. I will use these terms to address the historical shift from farm woman as wife to farm woman as boss. Moreover, my discussions with Dutch female farmers reify these concepts.

Women’s lives off of the farm have greatly shifted, too. Margreet van der Burg outlines the history of farm women’s pursuit for education in her article *From Categories to Dimensions of Identity*. Like Fisher, van der Burg acknowledges the variation among the category of farm

women: “[they] can have a different age, marital status, religion, education level, ethnic background and set of values” (1994: 125). She then uses certain socio-cultural dimensions-- *economic, gender and geographic dimension*-- as a lens to examine women’s fight for education in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. According to her research, there was a constant political and social struggle for education among rural and farm women’s transition into the classroom through the beginning of the twentieth century. Yet, this does not particularly apply to my research since the oral histories that I will convey narrate the lives of women who had access to education and, in almost every instance, took advantage of such an opportunity. To connect Verbole’s distinct differentiation between rural and farm women, van der Burg notes the cultural or mainstream association that automatically connects farm women with a rural life. She explains that society tends to look at farm women as dichotomous to urban women, which made rationalizing a formal education even more difficult, especially politically. Although most of the women in my research may have grown up on farms themselves, they were neither academically nor otherwise oppressed as a result of their rurality and this is most likely the result of modernization, since my informants grew up in after the middle of the twentieth century.

The Dutch female farmer does not exist. However, I will employ the foregoing scholarly texts to demonstrate how a few current female farmers shift or uphold the historical stereotypes of women farmers. These few women’s narratives can also be a commentary about socio-cultural meanings around agriculture and feminism.

Definitions

Farming

Farming literally means the business or action of raising crops and/or livestock.

However, this word has a more personal and varied meaning depending upon the respondent. I asked each woman how they define this word to gain a further understanding of their reasons for *farming*. In every instance that I posed this question, every woman paused, her eyes seemed to glaze over with a combination of a warmed heart and nostalgia.

Anke and Alice:

An: [without hesitation] *It's a way of life.*

Al: *Isn't that what I told you!*

[True to her word, Alice has said these exact words without Anke present an hour earlier]

An: *It's just in your blood. That's how I feel it.*

Al: *Yup, it's just in your blood. It's your destiny.*

Trijntje: *It is to grow food in a responsible way. Second, that it's a nice place for people, plants and animals.*

Iris: *For us, it's not only working. You have to find a balance between working and your private life. I know farmers who only work. That's not what we want. The past ten years, we have had a lot of work so we know how that is. But, that's not what we want to do for the future. ...It's in your blood! I think I feel that way too. Now, you choose if you want this or not. But, my grandfather would have rather been something else. He didn't want to be a farmer. My great-grandfather also had the land.*

Welmoet: *It is kind of a life because it takes so much time that that is what you do. I just love it to be outside. I can't imagine in an office all day in nature. Watching things grow. It's so beautiful to see. It's healthy for people. When volunteers come to our place and they are depressed and he is with nature and somehow this kind of spirit in nature--like the growing spirit--then you see it is really good for some people. It helps people. They work all day physically and then they're so tired that they sleep and don't think of the present and they just sleep. It has a good effect on people. I like to experience that. I think it's also healing, somehow. It's a beautiful life out here.*

Maria: *It is really a way of life. You can't just do it for a few months. You really have to know the land. I think it's a profession where you are more human because you are dependent on the weather. You need all your knowledge to do it well. You work with living things. That is, for me, what I like. You are in one big thing. There's the process.*

Biodynamic Farming

Many farmers in Holland acknowledge or work with the Steiner method, also called biodynamic agriculture. Fisher explains that biodynamic agriculture “emphasizes treating the earth and all the organisms like one cohesive unit. It goes beyond the organic principles such as no-pesticide use, and instead utilizes a more holistic, and often spiritual approach to the land” (Fisher: 29). When I spent the night at an agriculture school, the students with whom I ate had a nightly ritual to recite a quote from Rudolf Steiner’s book. Although I did not understand it because of the language barrier, the students laughed and told me that there was no such barrier for them yet the words still confuse them immensely.

Food

I also tried to understand what food connotes to these women. At times, their perspectives were shaped by their position as producers. However, this was certainly not always the case. Every time I asked these women about food, a long pause always ensued. As an evidently difficult question, these are the thoughts of a few women upon further contemplation.

Alice: *It’s something to handle with care, that’s for sure. And, I guess when you’re two women on one dairy farm then you’re more aware that you produce food more than average man. I think, as a dairy farmer. On average, yeah. I think our milking parlor and our cows are more clean than the average farm.*

Trijntje: *Well, it’s a joy, of course. Good food can replace lots of medicines, I think.*

Maria: *for the cows and the pigs, food is like petrol. Without food you cannot live. Okay, I was only drinking for 70 days but then you need the vitamins. For me, it means that it is important what you eat. It’s not because you cannot see that. For example, one brother eats a lot of pig meat. You can see that in time. He gets red around the cheeks. Food is important for how people are. I think for humans, the best and healthiest foods are things which are direct from the earth, from the tree, or water. It’s very healthy.*

Iris: *Food, in general...[laughs], I don't know! Food is not that we are biological persons. We don't pick foods from biological farms, that's not our way. I don't think that it's more healthy. It's more in your head.*

Welmoet: *I've always been interested in healthy foods. I like the way it tastes, the experience. You eat a potato and it's just potato. My mother is very conscious of healthy food. Then, when I was thirteen and I said that I wanted to be a vegetarian. Well, her parents were butchers so for her it was a real shock: "you can't be a vegetarian, you'll die! What will you eat and where will you get your protein?" For one week, she forced me to write down everything that I ate and to look up in this little book how much iron, vitamin B6 and other nutrients. I have been a vegetarian for 21 years. I think it was very good that she told me to do this because it made me more aware of nutrients. I was really conscious of eating what we produced with our own hands. You know the soil from which the food gets its nutrients. It all influences what it is. Then, when you eat that food, it also influences you and it all becomes your body. A build-up of these vegetables! I think it's an extra that you know where vegetables come from and that you can see it. For me, that I grow it myself. That is an extra to your food. It's not just any cauliflower. You put your own energy into it. It's a full cycle.*



Anke with her raw milk

Feminism in Farming

Initially, I was unsure how theory would supplement the life stories of female farmers, but, after speaking with the women, it became clear that they do have an investment in both the land and in *nature*. Thus, the theory that woman is to culture as man is to nature proves worthy in this context. However, I will apply Sherry Ortner's more fluid approach, to this theory: women are *closer* to nature whereas men are *closer* to culture. In defining culture, Ortner explains that "we may thus broadly equate culture with the notion of human consciousness, or with the products of human consciousness (i.e., systems of thought and technology), by means of which humanity attempts to assert control over nature" (1974: 72). According to Stephanie Fisher, this Western association allows for further subordination among women in the agricultural sector (2010: 20). Farming throughout history and contemporary experiences of female farmers illustrate society's attempt to keep women in the private, "natural" domain while men work in public, "cultural" spaces.

The liminality of public/private spheres in farming has allowed women to be dominated by domestication. Although there is a fine line between home and work in farming, the distinction remains clear in terms of gender roles. In essence, women are viewed as closer to nature because they are more involved in the private sphere: childcare and the home. We see that both Maria and Iris act as mother, cooking and taking care of the home, while they also milk the cows. They are not stuck in one sphere or the other, but balance between the two. Similarly, there are now plenty of men who cook and clean for themselves as bachelors. Through time, both men and women are changing their roles to be more independent entrepreneurs. Some say that "transforming the raw into the cooked may represent, in many systems of thought, the transition

from nature to culture” (Ortner: 80 *originally from* Lévi-Strauss, 1969). Then, are the women who transform the seed into the grown food more agents of nature than culture? Alice and Anke’s relationship complicates the gender associations with the public/private spheres for two reasons. Firstly, Alice is a woman who has her job and makes the main income outside of the house. Secondly, Anke, as the woman, is “the boss” of the farm yet does not go into “public” life as much as Alice, since her job is at home. Does this make Anke a player in the “private” world? Michelle Rosaldo proposes that if women do not enter the men’s world then they should create a public world of their own (1974: 35). Perhaps, this is a reason for women to start their own farms in a time when female subordination in the field still exists.

The use of more technology in agriculture is viewed as a symbol of the increasingly distinct gendering of agriculture. When talking to these six women, all alluded to their closeness to nature or their animals as reasons for loving their job. Only the two milk farmers (who were, coincidentally, the only non-biological farms) mentioned their future need to increase in size. Storm-van der Chijs noted that “a transfer of dairying from the farm to the factory implied a shift to the other gender’s domain” (van der Burg, 1994: 128). Because men are associated with industry, women are actively pushed away from large-scale agriculture. Rosaldo explains that “womanhood is an ascribed status; a woman is seen as ‘naturally’ what she is” (1974: 28). Alice had a visceral reaction when I suggested that her farm was industrialized:

I think our dairy farm is not an industry. This is a family farm. And, all animals have a name. It’s not mega-big. This is very different from industry. But, the sound of industry...it doesn’t feel like that. Not for us. It’s a craftsmanship, that’s important. I think that if you produce food and you use animals for that--chickens, pigs, cows--you should start at the bottom. What does a chicken, cow or pig need have a really nice life? Start there. Make sure the animal gets everything he needs and then make the cost price.

Alice shows us that the natural condition of her farm and the animals is most important. Farming as a *craftsmanship* is becoming obsolete in the face of industry. Trijntje emphasizes her connection to nature when she explains that she loves working with her hands. Like Welmoet, she does not look at the economic or cultural benefit until the end. While Alice works with mechanical milking units, her priority is still rooted in the empathy she feels toward her cows. In short, the male hegemony of agricultural industrialization devalues women, giving rise to a larger number of small-scale farms run by women.

This small group of female farmers illustrate a complex relationship with such dichotomies as public/private spheres and nature/culture identities. Ortner reminds us that “the culture/nature distinction is itself a product of culture, culture being minimally defined as the transcendence, by means of systems of thought and technology of the natural givens of existence” (1974: 84). These women don’t seem to see farming from a mechanical, industrial point of view. Therefore, one might say that they uphold a stereotype, being closer to nature and saying things like “I just love animals and always wanted to be part of nature.” Yet, their role is complicated because they participate in nature as a way to be in the public sphere. How are we connected and what in the outside world connects to the inside world? These women are capable of connecting with nature in this way.



Welmoet's vegetable stand

A Farmer's Inspiration

"I hear and I forget. I see and I remember. I do and I understand." ~ Confucius

Inspiration can come in a myriad of forms: a split-second experience or a relationship that lasts decades. The key component is that the influence tends to be profound and permanent, emotionally, intellectually and/or physically. I asked my interviewees what and/or who inspired them to become farmers. Their responses and thoughts were both moving and surprising.

I was obliged to talk with some of the women in their element, while they were doing their farm tasks. In the milking parlor, Anke told me a story that epitomized her infantile love for farming, which began when she started milking cows on her grandfather's farm:

One day, my family didn't know where I was and everybody got so worried and they were searching everywhere. Finally, they found me among this big herd of cows. Just sitting. I was so happy there. ...I just did everything from milking to feeding the cows and the calves.

All of the women had grown up around some sort of rural or agricultural setting. Like Anke, Welmoet was also enamored by her natural surrounding:

As a child, I was already very concerned with the environment. When I was seven, I already had an environmental club. We wanted to save nature! I remember that I just loved the animals and I was always with nature. With friends, I would walk and look at trees and birds. That was all my life.

Upon asking the women who their role models were, I was consistently met with silence that was often followed by an uncomfortable or bewildered laugh. Welmoet actually howled with surprise and admitted that she didn't know. After a few minutes of contemplation, she told me to come back to the question. At the end of our walk around her fields, she realized that one of her greatest mentors was the man who owned the farm at which she had her internship which is consistent with her story about wanting to start a farm in the first place:

I always thought I would never do such a thing. Or that I could do that and it would be my life. But, I did this education and had the internship. Then, it just grew somehow. I thought, wow I

really want to go on with this. It's really a part of me. I'm so in it. What will I do with it? Then I started writing things down and plan a little bit for fun. I said, I would like to start my own farm (Welmoet).

Listening to this story, I empathized with Welmoet's transition from a conscientious environmentalist who supports biological producers to realizing her dream and becoming that producer. However, I have yet to transition from the former to the latter. While a farmer from her internship may have been her initial stimulus for starting a farm, Welmoet seemed to accomplish this goal on her own, with the support of her business partner. Similarly, Maria was adamant that her inspiration came from within herself albeit there was an individual who inspired her in general. Having lived in Chile to help with social movements and agriculture work, she found her role model:

When I was in Chile, I worked with a woman who, in the time of dictatorship, was so powerful from within. She had so much courage to say the things that some people don't want to hear. To be there with the indigenous people, how they defend their earth. That is why we are organic and try to produce food that is healthy for people and we don't put chemicals to the earth for the future. We don't take foods from other parts of the world for our animals here. I think that people can use their own earth to grow food for people (Maria).

Like the motivation of her colleague in Chile, Maria channeled her passion and inspiration for farming from inside, "I *had* to do something." Because Maria grew up on a farm, I was surprised that she did not mention her parents and childhood as inspiration in starting to farm. She assured me, however, that everything came only from herself. However, many of the other women were greatly influenced by their family members.

On our walk around the hazy meadow where concrete buildings loomed just above the fields of potatoes, kale, and Brussels sprouts, Trijntje and I talked about her life story. One of the most distinct moments of our discussion was when she mentioned her father. Her eyes seemed to glaze over and her smiled exaggerated ten-fold. I do not think she realized her drastic shift in

disposition. She admitted that her father was very fond of her and I could tell that she reciprocated such sentiments. Thus, when I asked Trijntje who inspired her, I assumed her response. To my great surprise, she fell silent and unsure as she stirred the soup we were having for lunch. Eventually, she named generic people in her life: teachers and colleagues.

Unconvinced but hesitant to push her further, I let her answer stand. As we ate lunch with the three rehabilitation helpers, she spontaneously jumped up and, without context, said, “the answer is my parents.” I immediately knew to what she was referring: “My parents are my inspiration.

The basic city-wisdom of my mother. And the love of the land from my father. My father, as they say, was too good for this world” (Trijntje). Her slightly somber, but sweet tone solidified my understanding of Trijntje’s memory of her late parents. Some women were not so fortunate in the adoration for their parents. Anke’s “second father,” her greatest mentor, encouraged her to travel to America and Canada as a way to see the world, while doing the work that she loves: cow farming. However, she also moved to America because she had a particularly poor relationship with her mother. In essence, her mother discouraged inspiration and motivation to achieve what she truly wanted. For some people, like the Dutch agriculture student with whom I informally spoke, adversity propels them into action. The people who told this student that it is impossible to start a farm simply motivated her further to achieve her goal. For Anke, her mother created such a toxic environment that the negativity would drown her. As Anke searches for words to explain her relationship with her mother, Alice jumps in to say that Anke’s mother “always tried to push her into the ideal woman.” For Anke’s mother, the ideal woman would be focused on domestic work and her physical appearance. She would appear and act in a normatively feminine way. At this point, they are speaking on top of each other and Anke elaborates,

--into a way that I wouldn't be. I would tell her, 'I would love to go to agriculture school' and she didn't want it. I have to do it. That's my feeling. I want to. So, I did. I'm always a little like the black sheep in the family. My sister, on the other hand, is perfect. Doing all the things my mother wants and she's so unhappy.

Particularly with getting started on their respective farms, most of the women have few people to keep themselves motivated. To the contrary, most of their family, friends and/or agricultural community doubted and disapproved of their initiative to start a farm. Before I even asked Alice and Anke who their current inspiration is, the answer was clear as they finished each other's sentences.

Alice: Personally, we inspire each other. A lot. We always talk about the farm. We talk so much about the farm and about the business that we have to say 'okay, we go out to see a movie.' It's always about what can we do better [with the farm].

Anke: And then we go to a birthday party and meet farmers there and we find ourselves just talking about the cows again.

When I asked them what they are passionate about outside of farming, they looked at each other, laughed, shrugged and joked, "falling asleep."



Maria's horses in the meadow

First Steps

Maintaining support when the women were starting their farms was difficult in almost every instance. They vied for legitimacy from their community, both personally and agriculturally. For Anke and Alice, support was particularly difficult to garner since Anke had recently left her husband to live with Alice. Anke elaborates:

A lot of people were against us. I left my husband and my children and blah blah blah. I took a lot of money out of that farm. That was the story that was going around. The people you thought were your friends just never showed up again. It made it extra hard. I invested already in [thirty] cows. A long time ago. They were on that farm. They were my cows. So, I just took them.

They started their farm with nothing more than the thirty cows, twenty young stock, and a goal.

Unlike Alice and Anke, who bought their farm, Iris and Trijntje inherited their farms because others in their family did not want it. When Trijntje took the opportunity to start an alternative agriculture business, her family was adamantly against her decision and even brought the case to court:

There was this whole battle full of lying. And they said, 'oh you can't do it! You know nothing about it and you haven't got money!' And I thought, 'aw well. I don't know much about it' so I went to look for an education. ...Then, there was still lying and they were trying to stop me. In 1996, I had my diploma and I got a tractor for my birthday. So, as I squatted in Amsterdam, I thought, 'now we must start!' (Trijntje).

Even once she began working on the farm, people would not take her seriously. Her aunt, who was one of the few supportive people in her venture, told her that had she been a man she would not receive so much criticism and bigotry. However, neither Iris nor Maria faced adversity from their families. One main reason is because their parents had farms, so, as Iris explains, “they were very pleased, yes. It doesn’t matter for them if I am a girl or that my brothers don’t want it.” Although Welmoet’s parents were not initially proud of her decision to start a farm, within the first year, they supported her dream. Yet, some people did not feel that she should be a farmer:

In the beginning, we were not taken seriously. We said that we wanted to buy a tractor and asked what they could give us with so much horsepower. Some people just didn't know what to say to us. They just said nothing. Didn't know how to react to women wanting to buy a tractor. They just didn't know what to say. After, we laughed about it (Welmoet).

Welmoet told me this story as we gazed onto her bright red tractor, sitting in the yard. She laughed and told me that making jokes was the best way to cope with such gender biases. I had heard this same statement from other women. The key is to not take yourself or the male-domination too seriously. Iris, however, had the belief that should her brothers want to take over her parent's farm then they should have it:

Then, if they don't want then I want it. Because, I know that I can't do it on my own when you're a woman. Sometimes, people say, 'a woman can also do that' but you see when you've got children then you can't do it on your own.

While it might be completely possible to defy Iris' assertion, she is right in terms of her own experience as well as that of Maria's. When she and Maria had children, their roles and tasks on the farm changed dramatically. "There were many things that I was doing. I was up at four am to milk in the morning. I made the cheese. I put the shit away. I did all that! That is why I didn't mind doing less. When my daughter was sick, nothing else interested me" (Maria). If a parent had to take care of a child, in this case, it was the mother who sacrificed the work. When Iris had her first child, she and her husband took turns working on the farm, but now that she is pregnant again, she is more tied to the home. To echo Verbole, Fisher explains that "on the farm, the line between reproductive and productive work is intrinsically blurred; there is no clear definition of what separates farm work from domestic labor. A woman's role on the farm often combined both productive and reproductive labor. The valued and recognized cooperation between these two types of labor was rare" (2010: 10). In essence, reproduction inhibits one's dedication to

productive labor, which leads to women's domestication. Of course, the latter did not happen so drastically in these women's circumstances. Explaining her experience on a more personal level, Alice tells me that it is easy to talk about effects in English but it is much more difficult to talk about emotions and feeling in English. While there might have been a minor language barrier, Alice and Anke clearly communicated their passion for each other, the cows, and the farm. After taking a few minutes to search for her words, Alice tells me that:

The situation that Anke has gone through, with her husband and her children, [that has led her] to come live with me... she has taken a lot of steps in her thoughts about how people should live. You have to live how you want to live yourself. You don't have any responsibility--only for your children--and for the rest of the world: none. We know this now. And, she has made some steps [forward] and some people are staying behind. They can't keep up with the new thoughts.

Anke echoes Alice's remark by adding, "they missed the train that I stepped on and they'll probably never step on this train because it's just too difficult." It is unclear whether Anke is referring to her sexual orientation and/or her farm lifestyle. However, it does not matter because both aspects of her life shape her current state of joy and satisfaction.



Anke driving her tractor

A Man's Field

You know, that we are women is not really an issue for us. It's just part of our identity.--Alice

Farming has been historically dominated by men. Women were the helpers and the home-makers. The industrial tractor was designed *by* and *for* men. The tool that re-engineered the way in which farmers conducted work was completely geared toward men. The levers and pedals were often too far away for most women to be able to adequately maneuver the machine (Stephanie Fisher, 2010: 10 *originally from* Ann Rosenfeld, 1985: 23). Welmoet's story about prejudice in shopping for tractors has further implications. Every woman mentioned that one of their greatest challenges is driving the tractor and that when people would ask about their farm, they would wonder who drove the tractor. Trijntje emphasizes this point when I asked what her least favorite part of farming is: "I used to do all of the outdoor work. But, I don't really like tractor-driving. I'm a bit conventional like that. I would rather do it by hand. It doesn't make a noise." She also noted that "I do all of the handwork and he does all of the computer stuff. Which, I don't mind. In general, guys are more with the machines." While she is not speaking of agricultural machinery, specifically, she still makes reference to men's increased aptitude for technology, thus upholding men's empowerment in this area. Welmoet's tractor story epitomizes the gendered nature of this machine and its success in keeping women away from the fields. While there is not concrete evidence for this assertion, it seems that the heavy usage of machinery in industrial agriculture is a main reason why there is a much higher percentage of women involved in small-scale agriculture. In America, women's farms are typically half the acreage of an average man's farm (30-31, *originally from* United States, Women Farmers). According to Anke and Alice, the most frequently asked question of people *in* agricultural businesses ask, "which man does the tractor work? Do you hire a man for the tractor work?" The

only reason why I knew to scoff at this question is because a few hours earlier, I watch Anke step into their industrial tractor and flawlessly drive it along the barn to feed their cows. In short, the tractor work was clearly failing at keeping these women inside of the home. Little to my surprise, they tell the inquirers that they do hire a man, “we are joking but you have to otherwise they drive you nuts! You have to make jokes about it.” Like Welmoet, Alice and Anke feel that the best way to cope with the conservative mentality is to laugh. Alice went on to describe another discriminatory moment:

I remember there was a knock on the door and the man said, ‘is the farmer home? Where’s the farmer?’ I told him, ‘here I am!’ and he said ‘I mean the man of the house’ and I said, ‘we don’t have a man here’ so he turned around and walked away. We never saw him again.

Maria told me almost the exact same story. She explained that there was a lot of fighting in the first few years of farming. She did the milking and the cheese-making everyday yet when the salesman came to the farm, he was always looking for “the boss” and they never meant her, “In the beginning, I always had the power to fight but then I got so tired. I tell them that we have the farm together but they don’t care.”

With Anke and Alice, it is not clear that the adversity they face is connected to their sexuality as a lesbian couple or that they are women in a man-dominated occupation.

Regardless, Alice and Anke don’t see themselves as any different from a farming partnership of a husband and wife or two men:

That we are two women is not important at all. We are two human beings who have a dream. We try to be as noble as we can be and we know this now that we are here for two and a half years so it’s much easier. People come here and see that we are not kissing all the time and holding hands. They think, ‘it’s not too bad.’

When I asked the women how they see their jobs as female farmers different from those of the men, Iris and Trijntje responded notably. They, too, told me that they are no different than men.

Iris said, “It’s not that I have to prove myself. No,” while Trijntje retorted my question, “I am a sort of man! I can’t get excited about clothes or anything.” There’s a sense of androgyny in which they refuse to see a distinct difference in their job solely based on their gender. This was also true for most of the young agricultural students, as well.

After a brief visit to Warmonderhof agriculture school, I learned that more women than men attend this biological agriculture school. However, in the school next door where practices are less ecologically-focused, more men than women attend. Anke recalled her personal experience in the latter institution:

At school..., the guys were always a little bit “ha ha ha girls can do the practical things first.” They probably had a laugh and things like that. So, the guys always challenge the girls. You always have to be 100%. But then I have farms where I did my practical work and I found like, “can I work at your farm?” and the farmer would say, “no, you’re a girl.” [I solve this problem by] getting a farm who wants a girl and prove that the other [farmer] is wrong.... You can do crappy jobs like wash the windows or the milking parlor. They let you do stuff like that. You don’t drive a tractor. You’re probably not going to do anything with the cows. So, they just have you clean and stuff like that. ...Some farmers are just really old-fashioned and they don’t want girls and if they have a girl then they only let them do the cleaning, you know? So that’s it. It’s not true for some good farmers though.

While there are conservative farmers who still believe that agriculture should be exclusive to men, many men show no sexism. In this quote, Anke chose to describe the farmers that did accept her as “good” farmers. This statement could be complicated by her role on her ex-husband’s farm. When I asked Anke how her role has shifted in working at the different farms throughout her life she said that she was always the “wife of.” She was the wife of her husband and always the second one in line for responsibility of the farm. Anke explained further that not only was her husband the man of the house but moreover, “he was the son of his father from whom he took the farm.” Now, Anke and Alice’s farm is a way for both of them to maintain their own autonomy. Although Alice might have a more stable income from her publicity business, she

alludes to Anke's leadership on the farm at least three times during the course of our interview. She explained that "of course we decide a lot of things together-- *Strategic* things. But, she's in charge. It's quite obvious." Genetically, there seems to be an embedded male domination within the profession. Anke's foregoing quotation shows how she juxtaposes the farmers in adversarial groups and then discounts the integrity of the sexist ones when she adds that "girls are better milkers. [They are] more careful, more patient, and easy with the cows. No shouting, hitting. We can do two things at a time. Three... And a guy just can do one thing at a time." This conjecture was reiterated in a Dutch television show that broadcasted stories of young, Dutch women farmers who are taking over their fathers' farm. In a short preview of the series, they explain why they, as women, make better farmers than men. They explained that women tend to be more organized and can multi-task better than men. These are necessary skills in running a farm because although it might be a lifestyle, farming is also a business. Managing the tasks with the livestock and/or produce is just as important as tending to the bills. While this generalization cannot be or tested, Alice and Anke saw this to be true.



Herding the cows for milking

A Woman's Farm

You learned how work in teams. It's not a competition. You have to work together--Trijntje

Some of the women employ distinct methods on their farm that could be seen as particularly feminine in the way that Hofstede defines cultural femininity: when values about gender roles overlap, where both men and women are expected to be modest, caring and concerned with the quality of life (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005). The biggest lesson that Trijntje brought back from grape farming in wine country was the importance of collaboration. She explained that “You learned how to work in teams. It’s not a competition. You have to work together. Lots of people can’t handle it. I like it!” Welmoet hesitantly said that:

Maybe women have naturally different priorities than men. It's just a thought. For men, it's more about kilos, tons, tractors, and business. For us, we also have to be conscious about economics but we also have the volunteers. That's much more working together with other people. That we are also socially active, you take care of people. That's an element on our farm that's important. I think that factors in to why you see volunteers at our farm.

Like Trijntje, Welmoet also emphasized collaboration as a key value to her successful farm.

Another sign of group cohesion can be seen linguistically when Maria alluded to normative male/female speech ideologies, “when the women speak, they say *we* do this but when the men speak then they say *I* do this.” She then continued to say that it is much more affective to speak about tasks and priorities in terms of “we.”

Since these women seem to prioritize collaboration, they also greatly value their own ability to instate such work mentality on the farm. While both Iris and Maria own their farms with their husbands, they distinctly noted the importance of working independently. Iris explained that “you are free to do what you want to do. It is your own business. ...You are your own boss but you earn your money with it.” Maria, however, expressed experiencing this only when her husband was gone. She explained, “I liked very much to work on the farm alone. I

could do it in my time, my way. I was the manager.” Maria and Iris both connect their autonomy with their ability to balance their personal and profession lives. The two women worked much more arduously when they were starting on their farms but now they have found joy in working fewer hours in the milking parlor and more time with their family and friends. Maria reiterated, time and again, her enjoyment of being with people in her work and personal life. She would rather meet school groups at her farm, teaching them about cheese-making, and selling her goods in a littler shop, constantly communicating with the public. Thus, farming satisfied her aspirations of being a teacher and a saleswoman while maintaining her own farm. This comes back to some women’s view that women are very good at multi-tasking.

Initially, some of the women saw no difference in being a woman in the farming profession, hence a sense of androgyny which I mentioned in the previous section. However, upon further questioning, Iris opened up:

I think that there are qualities that women have more than men. When you are a woman and you do this job, you can’t do anything on your own. You have to ask for help. I think a woman asks sooner for help than a man. Male farmers always think that they can do everything on their own. We have to ask for help, you can’t do everything on your own. Things are too heavy or animals are too big.

Welmoet proves Iris’ candid view about women’s physical limits because she hurt her back from lifting crops this summer. On the bright side, Welmoet emphasizes the advantage of being a woman in such a situation. As women farmers, Iris and Welmoet admit that they have no shame in asking for help and, in turn, other farmers enjoy giving assistance. Welmoet elaborates:

From a man you can ask for help more easily. For a man, he usually wants to help a woman. If I was another man then he would say, ‘just help yourself, you’re a man.’ That’s just what I think. When we say, ‘can you help me with a machine?’ then a lot of people would help us and explain everything to us. But, another group of men just won’t take us seriously.

Because of Welmoet's injury, it seems as though she did not ask for help as soon as needed. This instance also illustrates that what we say is not necessarily how we act. Although women might ask for help more readily in some instances, anyone can make the mistake of over-estimating their physical strength. The last part of Welmoet's statement subtly points to the Anke's experience with conservative farmers who feel that farming should remain in men's hands.



Trijntje weeding the field

Economics

Unlike the economically dependent wife of the farmer, women are financially independent in starting and maintaining their own farms. Anke and Alice have balanced the financial burden such that they can have a relatively small farm but still maintain economic stability.

Al: We have two legs under the chair. It's my business and it's the farm. That makes the farm easier. The one goes better or the other goes better then it helps.

An: Alice brings in the money and I spend it like crazy, you know?

Their first year helped them to get the rest of the farm going solely from selling the embryos of their most prized cow, Lucky, the 2008 cow champion of Holland. Lucky currently lounges in her own pen and is the first one to be milked every morning and every evening. Unlike parents who refuse to choose pick their favorites, Lucky is unquestionably the chosen one. After our interview, Anke even went into the office, returning to the kitchen with an album of Lucky standing erectly in a charming, Dutch meadow scene. Alice tells me that it is most important for the cows to have a happy life.

First, we make sure the animals get everything they need and then we make the cost price. If you buy a liter of mineral water in the supermarket, it's 1.50e but a liter of milk is 50 cents. It's incredible. For that liter of milk, you have to put the cow to work, as well. It's a shame.

Because of the open market, milk prices fluctuate with the shifting economy. This makes it particularly difficult for dairy farmers to succeed. Alice and Anke are privileged to have worked out their system such that they can maintain the farm as an intense avocation, of sorts. For Iris, this is one of the greatest challenges and threats to her role as an independent business owner:

Some years you make a lot of money and some you make nothing. That's the farming life. You have to always put something aside for difficult years. That's when you're your own boss. Every year, you don't have the same amount of money. ...If we don't earn enough money then we don't farm anymore. And, it's over and out.

However, the economic stability of farming is not such an issue for Welmoet:

The profit is important because it's difficult to have enough profit to live. It's quite difficult actually to live from this. We have two workers and about eight volunteers. ...For me, [profit] is not so important actually. That's why I can live from only very little money. [But], it is one problem with farming.

Some of my informants, while maintaining their own farms, are still economically dependent upon family and/or friends. It's the opposite of history in that now individuals might not farm for the money, at all. In the past, wives stayed with the husband to have sufficient income through her husband's work. However, parents are having to supply start-up costs to assist young people with their farms. This is very different from the historical perception of farming as a great source of economic independence. Anna Maria Storm-van der Chijs, a Dutch feminist in the 1860s, encouraged women to expand their tasks on the farm but to limit themselves to jobs that were not too arduous such that they were capable of achieving. She told women to focus on work close to the home: gardening, milking, cheese-making, and book-keeping for instance. She believed that women's agricultural labour was implicitly farm women's labor and thus strived to widen participation among more social niches such that more women would be economically independent and self-sustaining (van der Burg, 1994: 127). Maria did not begin farming for financial reasons, in the least. A few women explained that they probably would not last if they did not increase the size of their farm each year. Maria spoke directly to this point of rapid expansion:

Our object is that this cycle is going well. Our animals are healthy. That we make good, tasteful milk. Good cheese. That we can then sell more good cheese if it's good enough. But, it is not important to be the biggest or the best farmer. We just want to earn enough money that our farm is not going broke.

Paralleling Dutch legislation and work standard, Rachel Rosenfield's analysis of the 1980 American Farm Women's Survey shows that most women's contribution [to the farm] was considered as part of the 'unpaid family labor' because of the way that society constructed a definition of legitimate work" (36). This is true in the Netherlands where the government would not compensate women's work unless they clocked in over twenty hours per week, none of which could be considered domestic labor (Geluk-Geluk, 1994: 125). Additionally, the government further deters women from laboring in the field because "social security system does not pay out for replacing women in the farm labour if they get handicapped" (van der Berg, 1994: 126). Therefore, a woman in a male/female partnership tended to become a *supporting wife* because she would take on domestic burdens and thus could not be duly compensated for her work in the field.



Maria's cheese room

Indescribable Love and Commitment

The mainstream perception of farmers varies widely. Margareet van der Berg explains that “by bourgeois middle classes their so-called lack of refinement is connected to being not civilized, rough, backward and traditional. In contrast, romanticists describe the same persons as balanced, honest, industrious and reliable” (1994: 126). I fully experienced the latter when talking with these motivated and courageous women. Some of their interests in the farm, however, surprised me.

Trijntje’s favorite part of farming, for instance, is the weeding, working with your hands. She explicates that “it’s like digging for gold.” It was a bit different on the dairy farms. Frankly, I was surprised to find that Anke and Alice do not practice biological farming. The more I spoke with them, the more evident their absolute adoration for these cows became. I had a preconceived notion that in order to properly care for cows, the farmer must be as natural as possible in his/her processes. On the opposite side of the spectrum, Maria greatly valorizes organic and biological farming. Yet, her true love for cheese-making lies in the full cycle of raw materials:

You milk yourself. You have the milk and then you make the product. You do the whole cycle yourself. In this time, in this society, there are such few things that you can do from the beginning to the end yourself. From the start to the selling to the people who eat your product. That’s the special thing for me.

Anke and Alice cringed when I tried to speak with them about “industrial” dairy farming. They refused to consider their farm part of an industry just because they did not have biological certifications or use particularly ecological practices. To their credit, the only noticeable technology on their farm was the milking machines, albeit there certainly was a tractor.

Al: We definitely come at it from a very different perspective. Working with the animals, for us, is the first issue in agriculture. Not especially making food. That's not the main reason why we do this.

An: No, but you're aware that you're in the food business so we have to clean and give medication and stuff like that. So, we would never do pigs or poultry because cows... I don't know.

As Anke says this last statement, she comes to a loss for words and just smiles broadly at the thought of her 40 cows just meters away. While Alice's most challenging part of farming is the time commitment, for Anke, even the challenge is about the animals. She explained the difficulty of breeding her own cows but, more testing, "to breed a cow that is going to be a champion of Holland." Toward the end of my visit, Alice looks me in the eyes and says:

We are very proud to have fulfilled a dream. We said to each other that when you are 80 or 90 years old and you're in a retirement house, you have to look back on your life and think, 'okay, I haven't done everything right but at least I've done what I wanted to do. Tried it!'

These women wake up every morning to milk the cows or tend to their crops. Neither the cows nor the crops have holidays so many of these farmers do not either. As a "way of life," these farmers dedicate almost 365 days per year to their profession. To reiterate Anke and Alice's point: *farming must be in your blood.*



Welmoet and her business partner taking the first sip of the hard cider made from their leftover apples. As their faces express, it was a little too bitter to be a big seller!

Concluding Reflections

These six women interviewed are all in very different states both in their womanhood and as farmers. Each woman spoke about their experience with thought and passion. I asked them to think critically and, in turn, I learned about the women's values and views through their stories and reflections. In some cases, the women surprised themselves in their reactions and responses. Our discussions allowed them to express themselves in a thoughtful way that served for both my research and their own self-awareness.

Last summer, I conducted research about women in Washington, DC. I was obliged to spend one hour with the interviewees before leaving. While I was grateful to even have the opportunity to speak with such women, my data was not as fruitful because I was not able to conduct observational fieldwork. The female farmers I have written about spent hours walking me through their farms, cooking food for me, playing chess with me. All of these activities helped me to understand these women in a more intimate yet natural way.

The journey was serendipitous, whether it was due to unexpected stories about sexism or finding myself in the car with a stranger who offered to drive me the last two kilometers to a cheese farm. My field research allowed me to be seen less as a researcher and more as their student and admirer. As my relationship deepened with the farmers, I was able to better understand the personal relationship that the women have with their work. When I worked on a farm in France, I thought that farmers have to be virtually socialist in their ideology. For farmers today make little for the amount of time and energy they devote to production. Each of the six women not only talked with me about, but showed me how they live each day with their innate passion and commitment to nurture and sustain their farms.

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Interview Guide

The the goal of my questions is to understand your life stories as well as gain an understanding of your opinion of the Dutch food system. As a profession that was historically for men, why you have chosen to pursue such a path.

Demographics

- Name
- Age
- Place of birth
- Highest degree of education
- Your current title and employer

Past

- What do (did) your parents do for work?
- What was your relationship with your mother and father? With your siblings (if any)?
- Have there been farmers in your family in the past?
- What did you want to be when you were growing up?
 - What were you academic/professional/personal ambitions?
- Who were your role models? Who inspired you?
- What kind of community did you grow up in?
- Were you involved in food and/or agriculture when growing up?

Current

- What are your academic/professional/personal ambitions now?
- What or who influenced you to go into farming?
- How did you get here?
- What do you like least/most about your work?
- What is the greatest challenge for you as a woman farming in today's society?
 - Why is that a challenge?
- Do you see yourself as having specific qualities as a female farmer that a man may not possess?
- How has your position as a farmer shifted since you began your work?
- How might you perceive farming as a lifestyle? A business?
- Are there other farmers with whom you are in touch? Female farmers, specifically?
- About what are you passionate?
 - What do you (*like to*) do when you aren't farming?
- Are you proud of your job? Of your work?
 - If so, what makes you proud?
- What kind of support do you need and from where/whom do you get it?

Future

- What do you envision for your own future?
 - In the next ten years?
 - Why?
- What is your ideal future?

Food

- What is farming? What does it mean to you?
 - I ask because most women in non-Western countries farm as the only reliable source of sustenance.
- What is food?
- What kinds of foods were you eating when growing up?
- How has that changed (if at all) since coming into adulthood?
- What do you typically eat in a day? Why? (Can these foods be categorized?)
- What is your view/opinion of the Dutch food system?
- What are your beliefs around government intervention in the food system?
 - How has it influenced your work (if at all)?
- What do you see happening to the Dutch food system in the future?
 - And its influence on your work in agriculture?

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